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No Higher Calling: Personal Reflections on the Task of Teaching

Abstract

This essay draws upon twenty-five years of teaching and a strong belief in the inevitable and desirable overlap between pastoral and professorial roles to present four personal convictions about the character of teaching. First, passion for teaching must be great enough to overcome the toil. Second, effective teaching focuses upon the learner and causes not blind acceptance but critical thought. Third, effective teaching engenders a commitment to search for the truth while dispelling indoctrination and dogmatism. Finally, teaching is an event where content acquisition sits within a broader experiential matrix.

KEYWORDS: dogmatism, indoctrination, Howard Tillman Kuist, pastoral care, pastoral preaching

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It is impossible to imagine a greater honor than the invitation to submit an essay to *The Asbury Journal* on the topic of teaching. Although all honest labor is to be held in high esteem, there is no vocation which is nobler than teaching. Teaching is, after all, the process which facilitates the formation of whole persons through the apprehension of truth. Therefore it is perhaps to be expected that the Gospels would describe the ministry of Jesus primarily in terms of teaching; indeed, of all the major designations the New Testament applies to Jesus, with the exception of “servant,” the only one which humans can share is “teacher.”

Yet the invitation is also an occasion for humility. It is hardly an obligatory bow to modesty for me to acknowledge that I am woefully inadequate to write such an article. Although I have been privileged to take classes under some leading authorities in Christian education, I hold no degree in the field. And although I have perhaps read my share of books on teaching, I am by no means intimately acquainted with the scholarly conversation on educational theories and practices. And although I have just completed twenty-five years of teaching, I am much more aware of weaknesses than strengths in my performance. I agreed to this assignment because I was asked only to offer some personal reflections stemming from my own experience; and I considered that I might be able at least to raise certain issues that may stimulate thought on this most important of all tasks. To avoid any pretense that this essay aspires to make a contribution to scholarly research I have refrained entirely from footnoting.

Since my remarks express personal reflections, I may perhaps be forgiven for describing my own background, and particularly the path which led me to become a teacher. I include this brief account only because it may provide clarity and perspective to some of the points I will later make regarding my convictions about teaching.

I consider myself fortunate that the two most significant influences on my young life were a Christian family and a healthy local church. Indeed, for me family and church blended into one comprehensive formative matrix. The church functioned truly like an extended family; and my family was so committed to Christ and church that family functioned almost as an extension of the church. Consequently the Christian community was profoundly powerful in shaping the way I came to see, feel, and think about the world.

And I was aware of this formational process, and deeply impressed by the

positive experience of being taught. I say “taught” because I did regard this formational process as a matter of teaching, broadly conceived. For me, the church was above all a community of teaching, or perhaps more accurately, a community of teachers and learners. Responsible and seriously involved adults within the church participated in both roles, always learning and (each according to his or her particular function) constantly teaching. Of course, some fulfilled their roles of learning (being formed) and teaching (forming) poorly, and none fulfilled these roles perfectly. But observing poor performance was itself a learning experience; for I began to realize that I could learn *via negativa*, by negative example.

Of course, the pastor was the person most obviously responsible for formation. It was not surprising, therefore, that I developed a high view of pastoral ministry; and that I identified pastoral preaching as an especially potent form of teaching. I grew up in a period before “children’s church;” and without making any judgment one way or another about such programs I can testify that I was profoundly affected by hearing preaching, and that my deep regard for preaching was forged before I was ten years of age. I recall on more than one occasion after a service walking behind the empty pulpit and gazing at it, imagining what it would be to proclaim such a powerful, potentially life-changing word, not just in pulpit but also through the various acts of pastoral care performed during the week; for I recognized that these were ongoing interpersonal expressions of the preached word. And this sense of wonder at the possibility of biblically shaped community through pastoral formation, which is really teaching, was largely responsible for what I took to be a call to pastoral ministry during my adolescence and for my consequent decision to pursue a ministerial education program first at college and later at seminary.

When I first matriculated as a student at Asbury Theological Seminary I fully anticipated a future in pastoral ministry. But increasingly I sensed a calling to theological education. I was highly resistant to abandoning the dream of pastoral ministry, and only after a great struggle did I submit to this change in ministerial focus. I was able to accept this modification of ministerial vocation only by the recognition that a professor in theological education can and should be something of a pastor. Because of the professorial models which I was fortunate enough to observe I saw that there was an overlap between the pastoral and professorial roles. I came to understand more fully that a pastor is fundamentally a teacher, at least according to the definition of teaching I offered above; for all aspects of pastoral performance involve in one way or another the process of facilitating the formation of whole persons through their apprehension of truth, and indeed the greatest of all truth, the truth of God. Conversely, I came to see that a professor in theological education within a confessional institution is in some sense a pastor; since teaching

involves the formation of whole persons forged in relationship. For one must not limit teaching to the dissemination of cognitive content, so as to reduce teaching to dispensing information; nor should one limit teaching to the development of skills, so as to reduce teaching to training. There is a place for those whose task is to disseminate information; but such a person is not a teacher, but a reporter. And there is a place for training; but a person who trains is an instructor, not a teacher. Although teaching is frequently construed according to one or the other of these narrow models, such views of teaching, especially in a Christian confessional context, are dreadfully inadequate; for they do not even begin to address the demands for ministerial formation that God has placed into our hands.

Thus I came early to the conclusion that teaching is infinitely more than reportage or training. Two and a half decades ago I embarked upon a journey to discern what teaching is. I do not have definitive answers. The journey is not complete, and in some ways it will never be complete. But I have come to embrace certain convictions about the character of teaching, a very few of which I present below. These convictions are my own; and I acknowledge that they may be wrong. Thus readers must judge the validity of these claims for themselves. Moreover, I put forward these descriptions of effective teaching not as things that I necessarily do, but rather as things I would like to do. They reflect the teacher I wish I were, and perhaps someday by God's grace, the teacher I will become.

1. Effective teaching issues from a passion for teaching which overcomes the painful toil of teaching.

I begin with what I consider to be the most fundamental desideratum for teaching. Teaching is arduous work. And a sense of duty, and its correlative, guilt, is incapable of providing the stamina which is necessary for pursuing teaching with excellence over the long term. The drive to press on, to go not only the extra mile but the extra two miles, can be sustained only from joyful excitement within.

Dr. Robert Traina, one of the greatest teachers under whom I have had the privilege to study, would in spite of his poor health schedule extra sessions with interested students so as to develop certain matters he had discussed in class and to give students an opportunity to dialogue with him in ways that were impossible in classes of forty-five to fifty students. He would frequently talk with students for hours after a class had ended. During my first year as a faculty member at Asbury, I received a call one Friday evening at 7:00 from Dr. Traina's wife, who asked me if I had seen her husband; it was dinnertime and he had not yet returned from the seminary. I discovered that he was still in the room where his afternoon class had ended four hours earlier, enthusiastically discussing matters of biblical interpretation and theology with a student. It is

no wonder that one of Dr. Traina's long-time colleagues said of him, "He loves to teach."

As difficult as it may be to believe in our current media environment, there was in fact a "golden age of television," usually identified as the late 1950s into the early 1960s. One of the series which aired during those years, and is now largely forgotten, was *Mr. Novak*. It featured thought-provoking stories about a young high school teacher working with gifted students. I remember only one episode: A highly effective faculty colleague of Novak's sacrificed not only his comfort but also his health and eventually his life in his tireless pursuit of quality in teaching; he would, for example, work all night in order to return papers with copious comments within a day of their being submitted. All his efforts were met by little or no appreciation on the part of his students and ridicule on the part of most of his colleagues; from considerations of external inducements it seemed to be a foolish and futile thing to do. That episode has stuck with me for over forty years because it revealed to me for the first time the fundamental reality that greatness requires obsession.

In our culture we tend to view obsessive persons as unhealthy; and in most cases obsessive personalities are unhealthy. Yet possibly there is a place for obsession. Perhaps not everything should be done in moderation. For it is only on the basis of the exhilarating joy which captures us and drives us to a life of sometimes thankless toil that true excellence in teaching can be achieved. My advice to aspiring teachers may seem extreme, but I would urge that if they do not deeply enjoy teaching, if it does not thrill them, they should by all means consider another profession. This principle holds true especially for those who are considering teaching as a ministerial vocation; for this sense of exhilarating joy may be a key mark of divine calling.

2. Effective teaching focuses upon the learner, not the teacher.

If joy in teaching is requisite for excellence, it is not joyful excitement directed toward the experience of teaching as such but rather toward the event of another's learning. The focus is not upon the teacher, or her activity of teaching, but upon the student and his formation through his own apprehension of truth.

The act of teaching is highly seductive; there is a tendency for us to become infatuated by our own skills and mesmerized by our own speech. Moreover, the role of the teacher within the dynamics of the educational setting is bewitching. The sense of power and influence which belong to teachers can lead them to use apparently innocent relationships with students to satisfy their own personal needs. I have known teachers who have cultivated what could only be termed co-dependent relationships with their students. When teachers feel that they need students to address deficits in their own lives they

should know that their effectiveness immediately becomes compromised and that in fact negative student formation may begin to occur. Teachers like this should take to heart the famous words of Amos Bronson Alcott: "A true teacher inspires self-trust. He guides [his students'] eyes from himself to the spirit that quickens him. He will have no disciple."

A teacher who focuses upon students' learning will use all her powers of empathy and imagination to put herself in the position of students so as to identify with the ways in which they are thinking and feeling. She will be less concerned about what she says than about how she will be heard. And she will welcome and indeed invite an attitude of serious and reasonable challenge to her positions and statements. She will consider the creation of clones to be a shameful mark of failure; but she will regard her work as successful if her students learn to think critically for themselves.

3. Effective teaching engenders a commitment to the search for truth.

Teachers who attempt to create disciples to themselves and their own point of view rather than learners who are equipped to think for themselves will find that they have many takers among their students. There is a deep-seated tendency within many persons to address complex issues with simple and superficially plausible answers provided by authority figures. Here we encounter the critical distinction between indoctrination and education. Indoctrination arises from a profound sense of insecurity. Teachers who view their task as indoctrination lack confidence in the ability of their students honestly and effectively to arrive at the truth. For their part, students who welcome indoctrination fear that their own search for truth will land them in error or will result in their being faced with uncomfortable truth which if embraced would require them to make difficult and painful decisions.

But the search for truth is hindered not only by indoctrination but also by dogmatism. While indoctrination is the attempt by others, especially teachers, to impose ideas and conclusions upon their students, dogmatism is the inclination within students themselves to cling to their familiar and comfortable presuppositions and to refuse to evaluate critically their assumptions. These presuppositions, or unexamined assumptions, are socially scripted in that these presuppositions represent the perspectives of the group to which the person belongs; and they are thus deeply enmeshed in the consciousness of students, not only in their ideological structures but also in the very patterns of their thinking. These presuppositions may not be wrong, and students might very well come to embrace them as their own conclusions and thus experience what Paul Ricoeur calls the "second naivete." But genuine teaching involves equipping students, both emotionally and intellectually, to tease out their presuppositions and to expose them to the evidence, that is, to reality, with a commitment to change their thinking if the

evidence, reasonably assessed, requires it.

Both indoctrination and dogmatism arise from fear. Effective teaching and learning involve the refusal to submit to fear in favor of bold confidence in the truth and the ability of the truth to be known on its own terms. In large part, genuine teaching is the facilitation of the habits of critical scrutiny.

There is, of course, a cultural dimension to the inclination toward indoctrination or dogmatism. Certain cultures and sub-cultures encourage an unthinking submission to ideas which is based upon mere appeal to authority, either the authority of the teacher, as in indoctrination, or the authority of the perspectives of the group, as in dogmatism. But my own journey led me to participate in two cultural forces that actually challenged improper appeals to authority in favor of critical scrutiny.

The first of these forces was the broad cultural experience of growing up in the decade of the 1960s with its well-known suspicion of appeals to authority. Many persons in my generation emerged from that decade with a debilitating cynicism. But my experience of being intellectually formed during those years led me to develop a positive appreciation for the constructive possibilities of questioning indoctrinating authorities. I came to believe it was my duty to be prepared to challenge what I had been told or those things I had been conditioned to assume; because I believed it was only by that kind of bold confrontation that I could arrive at fresh and authentic discovery. I felt it was my responsibility to challenge, respectfully and tactfully, dubious or unsupported assertions by my teachers. And throughout my college and seminary years I was drawn to those institutions and professors who welcomed such challenges; and I did all I could to avoid those teachers who seemed defensive and resistant to serious questioning. Frankly, I did not trust them really to teach me.

The second of these forces was my experience as a student at Spring Arbor College (now Spring Arbor University). I found in Spring Arbor a school that was secure in its own sense of what it was and what it believed; and therefore the college was able to create for us students a wonderfully creative space of free inquiry and open expression of divergent ideas. The college was ideologically centered; there was never any doubt about its allegiance to evangelical Christianity within a broadly Wesleyan tradition. But Spring Arbor was so confident in the intellectual and experiential reality of this ideological perspective that the college judged that it would be unnecessary, and indeed perverse, to submit us students to the coercions of indoctrination. We were not indoctrinated; we were educated. And in most cases we embraced as our own the Christian perspective that we experienced so powerfully articulated and compellingly embodied there. We were empowered to think critically; we were expected to explore broadly; and we were invited to disagree, so long as we had the arguments and facts to support our contentions. I am grateful for

these experiences. It was through them that I came to loathe dogmatism. And they are in part responsible for my strong attachment to the inductive approach to the study of the Bible which I encountered first at Spring Arbor and then, in a more rigorous way, at Asbury Theological Seminary. For inductive Bible study is part of a broader intellectual commitment to radical openness to the evidence and thus to the embrace of the truth as we ourselves attempt honestly to discern it, within a community of learners.

4. Effective teaching is an event, not merely the communication of a body of knowledge.

I have just described how my experiences deeply affected my attitudes and commitments towards learning; and perhaps in the end they affected my ability to learn. But the determinative role of experience for learning is not unique to me; it is a universal phenomenon. Learning is itself an experience that involves the whole person; and therefore teaching is the creation of a holistic experience. Teaching is thus an event in which there is not only something which is communicated, but there is something which happens.

These claims are not intended to diminish the importance of content in teaching; for all learning clearly involves the acquisition of material knowledge. But they are an attempt to point out that learning is more than content-acquisition, and indeed that the acquisition of material knowledge most effectively occurs when it is part of a broader experiential matrix.

I have often thought that the ideal classroom experience is comparable to the exhilaration of a moving musical performance. The classroom event should lift students above themselves and cause them to bask in the indescribable encounter with nobility. As with an artistic performance, the classroom event should draw students upwards to the heights of wonder while resonating with the depths of their human, and more specifically Christian, existence. In fact, the classroom event should be even more moving than an artistic performance, because it involves not merely the beauty of a brilliantly orchestrated class experience with its eloquence and simple elegance, but also the power of truth.

The comparison with a musical performance suggests that the key to a moving classroom experience is careful orchestration, or perhaps better, planning. Every moment of the teaching event is boundless with promise and is therefore precious. It is also fraught with danger; for a careless word or an insensitive response to a question can hurt and humiliate and finally destroy the passion to learn. Therefore, nothing should be left to chance. Paradoxically, arduous labor in preparation results in the appearance of ease in classroom performance; and careful planning beforehand makes possible those unexpected serendipities which can render the classroom event a truly moving experience.

Of course, this kind of exhilarating excitement cannot be sustained at the same high level in every class period. That would be too much to expect, and probably too much for students to take in. But those class experiences which profoundly move students have the power to affect the rest of their lives. One of the college professors who most influenced me, W. Ralph Thompson, told of taking a class on Jeremiah taught by the great Princeton professor Howard Tillman Kuist. At the close of one class session the students were so overcome with their experience of the wonder of the biblical truth that no one was able to move for fully half an hour. That event had occurred thirty years earlier; and when Thompson reported it to me his eyes misted and his voice broke. Thompson was telling me that his experience with Kuist had significantly contributed to molding him into the man and the Christian and the teacher he had become. Thompson had been in the presence of authentic teaching. And what a difference it made to him, and through him, also to me.